



Dana E. Blackwell
Executive Director

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

COMMISSIONERS:
CAROL O. BIONDI, VICE CHAIR
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ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW
DR. HARRIETTE WILLIAMS, CHAIR

APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Tuesday, **September 7, 2004**, in room 864 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi
Patricia Curry
Joyce Fahey
Phalen G. Hurewitz
Helen Kleinberg
Daisy Ma
Christina S. Mattingly
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Sandra Rudnick

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Brenda Galloway
Adelina Sorkin
Dr. Harriette Williams
Trinity Wallace-Ellis, Youth Representative

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the September 7, 2004, meeting was unanimously approved.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the August 30, 2004, meeting were unanimously approved as amended.

CHAIR'S REPORT

Vice Chair Ma chaired the meeting and presented the chair's report in the absence of Chair Williams.

- A memo about the upcoming retreat appeared in Commission packets; Commissioners were asked to mark their choices and return the memo today to Dana Blackwell.
- Commissioner Fahey announced the proposed slate for Commission officers:

Chair:	Harriette Williams
Vice Chair:	Daisy Ma
Vice Chair:	Carol Biondi

Commissioner McClaney moved that the proposed slate be approved; Commissioner Mattingly seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved. The election will take place on September 27.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

- Changes to the department's system improvement plan have been made according to discussions at the previous Commission meeting. Strategic decision-making has been included in SIP 3 (reunification), as requested by Commissioner Sorkin, and the expanded use of volunteers—suggested by Commissioner Hurewitz—has been added to SIP 6 (services array). The plan goes before the Board of Supervisors next week.
- Of the approximately 130 children's social workers (CSWs) recently hired, half have already been deployed to regional offices and half remain in training until mid-September. The nine-week training academy covers baseline competencies and integrates new-hires into field work. The caseload yardstick negotiated with the union calls for an average of 31 cases per worker with staffing at 100 percent. Once new-hires complete their training, staffing will be at 119 percent, which should reduce caseloads to an average of 25 cases per worker. (These calculations do not include workers who are out on leaves of absence; those figures vary from office to office.)

Expressing concerns about the turnover of new-hires, Commissioner Rudnick asked about the experience level of those joining the department at this time. About 60 percent have a master's degree in social work, and two large training academies were instituted for them. Another training academy was established for the balance of the new-hires, who have bachelor's degrees in social work. Overall staff turnover has typically averaged between 11 and 16 CSWs per month, but that has not included new-hires, who have historically been classified into training units. Supervisorial support for the newly hired is clearly essential.

Commissioner Hurewitz asked about procedures in place when employees leave the department—an exit interview or other mechanism to track their reasons for terminating. The training division performs exit interviews when new-hires leave the training academy (which is rare), and the human resources division handles the responsibility

at other times. According to Michael Gray, exit interviews can be difficult to coordinate, and employees may choose not to participate in them. Commissioner McClaney stressed the importance of knowing why employees are leaving, and also asked about ongoing supervision once employees graduate from the training academy. Mark Miller stated that supervisors in the regional offices are held accountable for employee performance, and that the training academies strive to present information in a realistic environment. Practices are not necessarily consistent from region to region, and an attempt is being made to strengthen the role of middle-level managers. Dr. Sanders mentioned the historical tension between supervisors and training, especially with regard to caseloads, and noted a focus on the role of supervisors in supporting staff.

GROUP HOME CONTRACT PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES/DATA TRACKING

With the new outcomes-based group home contract, Angela Carter explained, the department's monitoring and technical support functions are being restructured into one administrative section, which will be accountable for partnering and communicating with direct service staff—plus regional managers, program managers, and providers—to ensure that the three primary goals for every child in a group home are met: safety, maintaining and enhancing well-being (including academic indicators), and achieving permanency.

The purpose of the administrative section, said Ed Sosa, will be to monitor group homes and foster family agencies, investigate when necessary, and provide technical support and assistance regarding performance. Providers have been informed by letter of the new structure, which will include quarterly to semi-annual reviews of all group homes.

Cheryl Epps said that the instruments to evaluate group homes are still being fine-tuned, but they are designed to track the new performance measures. Other data will come from social workers' quarterly reports on each child, plus information from the Auditor-Controller's office and Community Care Licensing. Staff will make quarterly or semi-annual unannounced inspection visits and identify systemic problems. They hope to combine the monitoring and liaison functions successfully, building trust and forming partnerships with providers and not necessarily waiting for them to ask for support.

Vice Chair Biondi has heard from some group homes that new ongoing paperwork requirements will be much more extensive, though Ms. Epps said that the goal is to help group homes lessen that burden with increased efficiency. Vice Chair Biondi noted that several group homes want to be made aware of resources that they may not know about, which Mr. Sosa said was also part of the goal.

In her work with the court, Commissioner Fahey would visit group homes every couple of months to get a better idea of where the children in her courtroom were going. She made a point of leaving her name and number, and often received feedback from children, staff, and therapists after the visit itself. She stressed the importance of meaningful data, saying that the source was sometimes more important than the information itself, and that interviews with strangers—rather than the child's attorney or another trusted adult—are often not helpful. She suggested making surprise visits at mealtimes or during

group therapy sessions, scheduling private interviews with therapists, and asking children what they talk about in sessions, what their schooling is like, and how much freedom they have to roam unsupervised. Simply making inquiries of the provider is not enough. Unannounced financial audits are also necessary.

Commissioner McClaney said that CSWs and others often come to a group home with a hostile attitude that encourages adversarial and retaliatory relationships. If evaluators used a 'kinder, gentler' approach, they would learn more. She emphasized a focus on the consumer—on the child.

Ms. Epps outlined the investigative experience of section staff, saying that they know how to approach children and remain sensitive to their needs, just as they would during an in-home investigation. If a child is close to emancipation, for example, they will inquire about life-skills training and other preparation that the group home may be providing. Facility inspections are extensive and include medical logs and staff logs. Children are always encouraged to talk to their CSWs or to the inspecting staff themselves. Commissioner Curry added that cards for the group home ombudsman should be distributed so that children may contact that office directly. Both that position and that of the independent-living ombudsman should be posted in facilities and made more visible.

In the past, Commissioner Hurewitz said, the department found that there were too many group homes to allow for regular reviews. Have additional staff been redeployed for this effort? He also acknowledged the difficulty of wearing both 'hats' (support and investigation) and maintaining a non-adversarial relationship. Ms. Carter said that no additional staff have been deployed, but they will be working on the division of labor with other departments, such as the Auditor-Controller's office. Mr. Sosa said that the Probation Department will also be involved.

In answer to an inquiry from Commissioner Curry, Ms. Carter said that the Auditor-Controller's group-home program section—formed because of a report from Quality Assurance—performs some monitoring, as does the department. Commissioner Curry recalled that monitoring was moved under the Auditor-Controller because a previous coupling of the monitoring and support functions had not been successful. She questioned the wisdom of returning to that model, and asked for clarification on exactly how data would be tracked. Ms. Epps reiterated that the monitoring instruments will capture the specifics of the performance outcome targets, which will be input into the department's information technology system and linked to its internal I-TRACK system.

Commissioner Kleinberg posited that, if group homes feel they must please only the centralized evaluation staff, they may not be responsive to CSWs or to the regional offices. Children often have little contact with the outside world—restricted church attendance, independent living activities, phone calls, family visits, and so forth. Does the new contract require a group home to provide this access? Ms. Epps said that activities are covered in the evaluation instruments and in the child's needs and services plan, which begins in the regional offices with family-centered group decision-making. CSWs are often aware of conditions within group homes, Commissioner Kleinberg said, that may

not be part of their regular reporting. Mr. Gray said that a policy has been drafted for social workers that he will be happy to provide to the Commission.

A dearth of outside activities, Commissioner Hurewitz said, is often due to a lack of transportation, and he asked if the department would form a policy to pursue resources. Commissioner Curry noted that group homes should be teaching older children—those approaching emancipation—how to use the public bus system. (Commissioner Fahey mentioned the possibility of obtaining bus tokens through the court.) Commissioner Rudnick observed that on-site schools can isolate children even further, and may not provide a good education. Ms. Epps said that group homes will need to address and remedy concerns about isolation and lack of activities, perhaps by hiring more staff. Staff/child ratios are already mandated within the contract language and the Quality of Life legislation.

Commissioner Fahey asked about consequences to a group home for deficiencies in service. If bad therapy is being provided, for instance, what happens? Elizabeth Howard explained that a corrective action plan would be developed for any deficiency, in collaboration with CSWs, the Auditor-Controller's office, and Community Care Licensing. If there is a failure to comply, the department has the ability to place a hold on referrals or to put the facility on 'do not refer' or 'do not use' status.

Dr. Sanders cited the recommendations of the reunification work group regarding the performance-based change in culture, which he characterized as a major shift. The department wants to use providers who meet the agreed-upon outcomes, and those who can't will not receive referrals. Ultimately, the department wants to do a better job of matching children to specific providers, as well. In that light, Commissioner Kleinberg wondered if comparisons were being made between large group homes and small ones, in terms of which provided better outcomes. There seem to be huge differences, and smaller group homes seem to prepare children better for life. She hopes that will be looked at.

Commissioner Rudnick also asked if evaluations would look at medications that children are prescribed. Ms. Epps said that information will be gathered on court authorizations, how the meds are administered, if children are refusing them, and so on. Commissioner Rudnick stated that those issues should be reviewed far more often than quarterly—children are kept on meds too long, they may be the wrong kind, etc. Many problems exist in this area, sometimes with disastrous results that are kept quiet. Commissioner Fahey commented that the CSW is responsible for flagging problems in this area as much as the group home. Ms. Carter said that she is working with Dr. Sophy's staff on case review structures, and Dr. Sanders suggested that Dr. Sophy address the Commission on the agreement with health nurses and how it ties in to CSW work.

Vice Chair Ma closed the discussion by stating her hope that reviews would take place quarterly rather than semi-annually. Commissioner Curry asked that the Auditor-Controller's office and the group home ombudsman appear before the Commission; Ms. Blackwell has started the invitation and scheduling process already.

DCFS TRAINING

According to Michael Gray, 80 percent of critical case decisions are made at the supervisory and middle-management (assistant regional administrator) levels. A training and policy focus on supervision is mandatory, as is aligning training and policy structures to the performance-based outcomes and new core practices such as family-centered group decision-making. A cultural shift such as the department is currently experiencing is much like hiring new staff; once initial training is complete, employees must be guided for a time to make sure that ‘practice fidelity’ is maintained.

The department’s training and policy structure must incorporate performance improvement plan elements (standardized throughout California’s 58 counties) as well as the recent work group recommendations and directed policy documents. Conferences and outside training resources can help, along with managing the use of the \$300 in targeted training funds available each year per employee. The differing cultures in each regional office must be taken into account, and evaluating training curricula and the subsequent ‘transfer of learning’—how training is integrated into practice—is vital.

Mark Miller detailed the principles by which training supports the department.

- **Stay informed**, both about core practice elements and different climates in regional offices.
- **Reach out**—stay linked with executive leadership, and realize that interdisciplinary and cross-systems learning is the way of the future.
- **Continually improve**—Is the training sticking? Applicable? Not working? Is a nine-week initial academy enough?

Current trainings include strength-based family-centered practices, family-informed case planning, strategic decision-making, and permanency. The next phase will cover work group recommendations, including strategic decision-making in the foster care module, timelines to family reunification, and planned visitation. Training implications are also contained in the system improvement plan. Whenever an initiative rolls out, training and reinforcement must take place, and the initiative must be linked to other current issues.

Commissioner Rudnick asked how training would address the attitude change toward families that is at the core of cultural change—treating families with respect and cultural sensitivity, and in a nonadversarial manner. Mr. Miller agreed that this approach was essential to the achievement of good outcomes, and believes that there may in the past have been a fear of losing clinical distance. Listening is essential for the success of the case, he said—offering families a voice, a choice, access, and ownership.

In light of the emphasis on supervisors and middle management, Commissioner Fahey asked about the utilization of standard management training courses. Mr. Gray said that the department was working with a San Diego university and another organization to provide this curriculum, and Commissioner Fahey offered more information if it was needed. She also suggested that each regional office conduct monthly brown-bag trainings, and that the training division review those agendas.

Commissioner Fahey cited one wish: that social workers be encouraged to make honest recommendations about a child's well-being, and communicate those to the court without any filtering through bureaucracy. Credible recommendations based on the facts of the family would make the court's work much easier and more effective.

Based on her experiences with reunification, Commissioner Kleinberg stressed the importance of breaking down barriers and learning to work with communities and have respect for families, perhaps by using families in training sessions and conducting joint trainings with the community. She also noted the need for sustaining the training experience, suggesting that coaches be placed in the regional offices and that trainings be available on videotape. (Training on conducting meaningful visits toward reunification is a particular need.) Mr. Gray said that an e-learning structure was being launched, and that mentor/coaches is a different model with the same objective. Mr. Miller agreed that using various case scenarios to cover both policy and practices is effective, as is addressing a range of learning modes to help the individual connect.

Commissioner Curry asked about the prioritization of all the different trainings, especially when there is such a massive shift in cultural focus. Emancipation trainings were done some years ago, but many social workers still do not know of the existence of an independent living coordinator and the many resources available for emancipating youth. In her experience, social workers don't have or take the time to learn on the computer. There can often be a three- to four-year lag between the time a new initiative is approved and when it becomes institutionalized for line staff. Mr. Gray acknowledged the procedural ambiguities and challenges inherent in keeping up and in funneling new approaches through the policy and training divisions. Ms. Carter said that monthly managers' meetings look at outcomes for the regional offices, and discussions with the regional offices are also ongoing to find out what they need. Getting at all the issues, not just pieces of them, said Dr. Sanders, is a formidable task. Priorities and strategic thinking are helpful. Commissioner Kleinberg stressed that employees have to know they need to change, and Commissioner Hurewitz suggested sanctions for those who cannot be trained, with supervisors identifying them for appropriate action.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Evelyn Mason, a relative-care advocate, commented on less than ideal conditions in some group homes, the lack of updates to the health passport, inappropriate medication that can cause adverse behavior changes, the needed formalization of legal guardianship relationships, and the complicated forms necessary for obtaining psychiatric help for a child in care. She stressed the need for information to educate relative caregivers on new laws and procedures, since sometimes even CSWs are unaware of new opportunities.

MEETING ADJOURNED